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ABSTRACT

Values clarification involves presenting a hypothetical situation to students that requires them to make a moral judgment. That moral judgment must be publicly affirmed by the student, but not criticized by others. Values clarification's philosophical context is existentialist. The values clarification philosophies and methods were consistent with the radical humanistic ideas and the popular philosophies of the youth of the late 1960s. During the 1970s, approaches in humanistic therapy flourished. In "Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students," S. B. Simon et al promote values clarification as not being concerned with the particular outcomes of any one individual's experience but with the process used to obtain his or her values. Simon asserts the traditional idea that right and wrong absolutes are obsolete and no final moral authority exists. Years later, motivated by various criticisms, Simon collaborated with L. W. Howe to publish a second book. That book reaffirmed values clarification and made clear misperceived interpretations of the theories in the first book. The four major sources of criticism were: religious conservatism, political conservatism, a therapeutic paradigm shift, and serious flaws with values clarification from the beginning. Given the amount of criticism directed at values clarification, should educators abandon it? Eventually, individuals are required to make a moral stance. Implementation of any type of values clarification should include parental consent. When students arrive upon a final moral decision, values clarification facilitators should carefully examine and even question decisions that may cause danger to others, even if the process that led to it is sound. The issues addressed in values clarification should be carefully examined before its use. (Contains 12 references.) (MKA)

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Values Clarification

An Issue Related Paper

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In 1966, Simon, Harmin, and Raths published a book titled Values and Teaching: Working with Values in the Classroom. This marked the beginning of a new approach to values education. This approach, termed Values Clarification, involves presenting a hypothetical situation to students that requires them to make a moral judgement. That moral judgement must be publicly affirmed by the student, but not criticized by others.

Values Clarification's philosophical context is existentialist. Existentialism promotes self-discovery and shuns the acceptance of other's predetermined ideas or beliefs. Values Clarification gives students the freedom and the responsibility to choose their own (set of) values. Jean-Paul Sartre, French philosopher and founder of "modern" existentialism, would not entirely agree with using Values Clarification during an individual's youth. He believed that we should begin to question existence at our "existential moment" that occurs "somewhere towards the end of youth when we realize for the first time that we exist as independent agents" (Ryan and Cooper, 1998, p. 320).

The Values Clarification philosophies and methods were consistent with the radical humanistic ideas and the popular philosophies of the youth of the late 1960s. Essential principles of Values Clarification, humanistic writers (e.g., Maslow and Rogers), and many of the time's counterculture writers influenced the "individual's critical questioning of authority, independent self-discovery, and an open-minded search for truths about life" (Kinnier, 1995, p. 19).

The therapeutic and cultural environment of that time may be responsible for the rise during Values Clarification's popularity. During the 1970s, approaches in humanistic therapy flourished. Values such as self-fulfillment, freedom, personal responsibility, and

respect for alternative lifestyles were especially popular throughout the country. Furthermore, many Americans disapproved of decisions made by governmental leaders and other authority figures during that era (e.g., Watergate and the Vietnam War). Publications addressing Values Clarification peaked during Jimmy Carter's presidency and declined during the Reagan administration. Coincidentally, Carter personally expressed values and behaviors that mirror the Values Clarification philosophy (Kinnier, 1995, p. 19).

The book by Simon et al., was committed to a relativistic position concerning matters of values. Furthermore, this approach was not as concerned with the particular outcomes of any one individual's experience as with the process used to obtain his or her values. Each aspect of seven criteria was required for one to satisfy "the valuing process." In order for something to be considered valued, it needed to be "chosen freely, chosen from alternatives, chosen after consideration of the alternatives, prized and cherished, publicly affirmed, acted upon, and acted upon repeatedly, in some pattern of life" (Kazepides, 1977, p. 100).

Simon asserts the traditional idea that right and wrong absolutes are obsolete and no final moral authority exists. He explains that none of us has the "right" set of values to teach other people's children. He proposes that students be unrestricted to discover their values for themselves through open and uninhibited discussions of hypothetical situations called "choice exercises" or "simulations." Each student is asked to develop "value strategies" in response to these situations. The student's final decision is not questioned if the process is sound. The decision-maker has made a choice to be valued and has arrived at a value preference rationally that he/she can truly call his/her own.

Finally, Simon contends that a student who has clarified his or her values will be "positive, purposeful, enthusiastic, and proud" instead of "apathetic, drifting, flighty, and inconsistent" (Beller, 1986, pp. 68-69).

Years later, motivated by various criticisms, Simon collaborated with Howe and Kirschenbaum to publish a second book on Values Clarification in 1972. That book was titled Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students. The authors used this second forum to reaffirm Values Clarification and make clear misperceived interpretations of the theories in the first book. This venture, however, led to further criticism (Vann, 1988, p. 18). There were four major sources of criticism "of Values Clarification: religious conservatism, political conservatism, a therapeutic paradigm shift, and serious flaws within Values Clarification from the beginning" (Kinnier, 1995, pp. 19-21).

Religious conservatism. Religious conservatives disagree with the ethical relativism that Values Clarification advocates. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* claimed that

> Values clarification theory consistently presents the individual self as the final arbiter of value truth (individuals must develop their own values "out of personal choices"), and it assumes that the good life is one of self fulfillment and self actualization. These positions directly contradict the Biblical view that God is the ultimate lawgiver and that the good life is to be found only in losing oneself in the service of God and one's neighbor. (Baer, 1982, p. 22)

Religious fundamentalists repeatedly expressed this criticism throughout the 1980s. Values Clarification proponents have argued, however, that all major religions believe that individuals have at least some degree of free choice (Kinnier, 1995, p. 19).

Political conservatism. Values Clarification was viewed as superfluous to education by the "back-to-basics" movement during the 1980s. Politically conservative columnists such as George Will implied that Values Clarification carried a "liberal agenda" and exhibit a lack of "intellectual rigor" (Kinnier, 1995, p. 20). George Will's contempt for Values Clarification is apparent in a commentary that attacked liberal courses at universities across the country:

> Such 'value clarification' [*sic*] aims at the moral reformation of young people who are presumed to be burdened with 'false consciousness' as a result of being raised within the 'hegemony' of America's self-perpetuating power structure. (Will, 1990, p. F3)

The conservatives' major aversion is derived from Values Clarification's association with humanistic ideology, the overrepresentation of liberals among Values Clarification proponents, and the often superficial application of Values Clarification's core ideas (Kinnier, 1995, p. 20).

Just another therapeutic paradigm shift. Values Clarification was conceived of the ideas of humanistic psychology during its height. Furthermore, Values Clarification's decline paralleled that of humanistic psychology. Fowler and VandenBos (1989) discovered a twenty-seven percent decrease in membership in the Humanistic Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association between 1980 and 1989. Moreover, this decrease occurred during a period of notable growth in other divisions (on average a thirty-two percent increase). Also, the decision-making and problem-solving literature, which arose from the "cognitive-behavioral paradigm, fared better than Values Clarification during the 1980s" (Kinnier, 1995, p. 20).

Internal Flaws of Values Clarification. In 1975, Stewart suggested

> If values clarification is going to fulfill its promise and exceed its past glories, it will have to make some major reformulizations and extend itself far beyond its present theoretical and empirical base. (Stewart, 1975, p. 688)

Other critics have observed similar failings. Gluck (1977) observed a game-like atmosphere during many Values Clarification workshops that often trivialize subject matter. Kazepides (1977) noted that some Values Clarification facilitators do not draw distinctions between trivial preferences and important values. Several writers (e.g., Gluck, 1977; Kazepides, 1977; Lockwood, 1975; Stewart, 1975) stated that Values Clarification interventions frequently serve to encourage participants to feel good about themselves and their values but do not "teach them how to analyze complex values issues rationally" (Kinnier, 1995, p. 20).

Values Clarification pioneers unsuccessfully argued that their values theory is derived primarily from John Dewey's Theory of Valuation and his Moral Principles in Education. However any person who is acquainted with Dewey's arguments about education and values understands that although he consistently supported a "naturalistic-type" view of values, he also strongly argued that any "intelligent position about matters of value had to use rigorous empirical inquiry and adhere to logical principles" (Kazepides, 1977, p. 102). Dewey's suggestions were not followed or considered seriously by the originators and promoters of Values Clarification. Although Dewey claimed that values were relative to the situation (of specific individuals) he also believed that the most important requisite for a moral statement is "social welfare, not the reinforcement and glorification of personal tastes, preferences, attitudes and beliefs" (Kazepides, 1977, p. 102), that the proponents of Values Clarification suggest.

Finally, Dewey believed that undiscriminating adherence to customs and traditions are obstacles that impede social and individual progress. However, he also stated that a social or educational policy that ignores the power of social, political, and economic realities is unrealistic. Dewey frequently emphasized that the relative effect of the social environment has a greater impact on the behavior of humans than on any other species and cannot be ignored by any account of human nature or value. Although he believed that every situation requires some form of moral dimension, he also observed the need for "distinguishing moral value from other aspects of the situation" (Kazepides, 1977, p. 102).

Given these discrepancies, an inaccuracy in some of Values Clarification's theoretical foundations becomes apparent. Simon et al. seems to have borrowed some of "Dewey's rather fuzzy concepts without paying very much attention to Dewey's doctrines" (Kazepides, 1977, pp. 102-103). A superficial connection between the views of Simon et al. and those of John Dewey is the result.

Given the amount of criticism directed at Values Clarification, should educators abandon it? Are there still positive elements that can be drawn from it? I believe that it is worth salvaging if modifications are made.

Eventually, individuals are required to make a moral stance. At that time, there may be no moral authority on which to call, or they may need to challenge existing moral ideas. Presenting the Values Clarification "choice exercises" to students causes them to reflect on their system of values. This activity may allow students to be more decisive when later faced with difficult choices. However, other aspects of Values Clarification

should be carefully observed or adapted in light of the extensive criticism it has undergone (Kinnier, 1995, p. 19).

Implementation of any type of Values Clarification should include parental consent. The perceived "moral relativism" of Values Clarification is often the principal source of concern. Many parents who believe in a specific religion object to any program or activity that presents alternatives to absolute truths. Other parents may hold the traditional (and sometimes not so traditional) view that their (and sometimes all) children should be taught a specific set of values (Kinnier, 1995, p. 19).

When students arrive upon a final moral decision, Values Clarification facilitators should carefully examine and even question decisions that may cause danger to others, even "if the process that led to it is sound" (Beller, 1986, p. 68). This is not actually in total defiance of the Values Clarification method though. The teacher is directed to share his/her position after everyone else has shared (Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum, 1972, p. 26). An alternative may be to immediately address decisions that appear unsafe or damaging to the individual or society. In that event, the teacher may choose to guide the student to an alternative decision.

The issues addressed in Values Clarification should be carefully examined before its use. Some children may not be developmentally ready to think about certain issues (e.g., sex, death, etc.) in the context which they are presented (i.e., "simulations"). The Values Clarification method even states that facilitators should be sensitive to student ages, but makes no specific recommendations (Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum, 1972, p. 25-26). I believe all of the issues are appropriate for high school, but careful selection

is necessary in middle school. It may be best to avoid using Values Clarification in the elementary school.

Despite extensive scrutiny and criticism, Values Clarification is still debated and even implemented by some educators. It has declined, but not disappeared. I believe it has benefited society by presenting a new concept that forced us to consider and focus on the importance of teaching values.

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